



PLAY
CREATIVITY
AND CULTURE

Canberra: A Playful City

Submission for ACT Events Policy

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INTRODUCTION

This is a city of brilliant possibilities.

ACT Events Policy Discussion Paper

Play is the laboratory of the possible.

Thomas Henricks, 2006

Canberra is in a period of remarkable and vital transformation. As the ACT Event Policy Discussion Paper notes, “Canberra has made significant progress in shaking off the unjustified tag as a place that is sterile, soulless and boring”. (9)

Key to this transformation is the growing suite of festivals and events held in the ACT and surrounds that enliven and enrich the Canberra experience, improving the region’s liveability, marketability and sense of place.

This discussion paper aims to contribute to the dialogue on the ACT Events Policy by proposing that *play* – as a form of positive and active cultural engagement across the lifespan – is embedded as a key element in the ACT cultural calendar. Play has and should continue to contribute to:

- the ongoing rejuvenation of Canberra's image;
- the continued enrichment of Canberra's cultural heritage;
- the health and wellbeing of the ACT community;
- the development of Canberra as 'collaborative, contemporary, genuine, forward-thinking and vibrant'

Canberra already has cachet as a cultural tourist destination thanks to the profusion of key quality national and local institutions. However, if Canberra is to be known as 'the coolest little capital' (ACT government), then any future vision of Canberra, as it manifests in policy and practice, should incorporate the principle of Canberra as a *city of play*. Events are absolutely key to this vision, as two of Canberra's most playful events – *Nightfest* and *Enlighten* – demonstrate.

Play is essential to the ACT events policy for six key reasons:

1. Play **ATTRACTS**: playful environments – including Festivals and events – hold strong market and lifestyle appeal across the demographic spectrum;
2. Play **ENGAGES**: play generates active engagement with objects, public spaces, the natural environment, and other members of the community;
3. Play **INSPIRES**: play enhances quality of life and adds diversity, texture, colour and light to daily experience;
4. Play **ACTIVATES**: play environments encourage physical, emotional and cognitive movement and exploration, and enable the development of new skills and the strengthening of old skills;
5. Play **TRANSFORMS**: play incites creative thinking, transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, illuminates alternative pathways, and stimulates novel

modes of encounter from which emergent ways of being and doing arise;

6. Play **BINDS**: play fosters community through the provision of sites of encounter around which strangers, friends and families can coalesce, engage and collaborate; and generates a sense of place

For Canberra to strengthen and enliven its sense of place and to transcend its negative destination image, we recommend the following are incorporated in the events policy 'mix':

1. The majority of large-scale events in the ACT Calendar are 'playful', or contain components of play to encourage active, joyful and non-ordinary engagement from visitors;
2. Smaller play events are held in key precincts throughout the year to develop Canberra's identity as a playful city;
3. A proportion of the play events are targeted at intergenerational and inclusive engagement and participation, with access and equity as core to both event design and execution;
4. The terms 'play' and 'playful' are deployed in the policy and marketing literature to build and reinforce the image of Canberra as a playful city;
5. The *Play, Creativity and Culture* Project, an applied research group in the University of Canberra's Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, collaborate with the ACT government and other key stakeholders to assist in the implementation of the above, and to undertake research on play across the lifespan in Canberra as it applies to events.

ACT citizens are privileged to be the wealthiest, safest, best educated and longest living population in the country, and among this same demographic worldwide. Such privilege affords opportunities for significant levels of play across the lifespan, which Canberra can and should embrace as core to its identity and practice.

We thus welcome the development of a vibrant ACT Events Policy – one which aims to strengthen Canberra’s identity as bold, open and vital; which is compelling to domestic and international markets alike; and which contributes to inclusivity, sense of place, opportunities for community engagement and happiness.



PONCHO CIRCUS, ANA (IMAGE FROM DAVID CAFFERY)

WHAT IS PLAY?

Play energizes us and enlivens us. It eases our burdens. It renews our natural sense of optimism and opens us up to new possibilities.

Stuart Brown, 2009

Play is easy to identify – we can tell when people are ‘playing’ rather than engaged in other forms of human experience – but the concept remains difficult to define because of its myriad applications and manifestations (Sutton-Smith, 2001; Burghardt, 2011; Feezel, 2013; Eberle, 2014). For the purpose of this discussion play is:

That positive affective experience generated by the interaction between participants, the available resources and the environment, that transcends ordinary experience, and fosters forms of engagement for its own sake.

Play is a broad arena and includes many leisure and sporting activities undertaken for their own sake; playground activities; games and gaming; festivals and events that incite positive individual and community engagement; joyful, creative and experimental encounters and collaborations with others and with the resources and environment around us; and any other intrinsically derived, non-ordinary and pleasurable moments that arise out of daily life.

Play thus involves the non-instrumental and non-ordinary activity that makes up the rich part of the cultural fabric of a region and of the lives of its citizens.

Many play theorists agree that to be *at play* requires a set of conditions. These conditions are loose and vary according to context and players, but can include:

- voluntary and open engagement on the part of participants (it is not play if the experience is coercive);
- a sense of security and absence of stress (it is hard to play when stressed or under threat);
- non-ordinary experience generated by novel and/or chance elements (play is defined in part by its distinction from ‘ordinary’ life);
- intrinsic purpose (play occurs for its own sake, rather than for extrinsic outcomes like financial gain or prizes);

- basic, loose rules and/or familiar elements that provide parameters and points of access (to be encouraged to play, we need to understand *how* to engage);
- a site that is to demarcated from ordinary life (the site can tangible like a board-game or a Festival, or intangible like a conversation between people);
- a positive affective experience; fun; pleasure; liberation from the everyday



SAY SOMETHING, ART NOT APART (IMAGE FROM DAVID CAFFERY)

EVENTS AS PLAY

Events feature at the core of Canberra's image, life and personality. They help shape public perceptions of Canberra and they showcase and share the very best of ourselves and our city.

A vibrant city needs a bold and diverse events portfolio that incorporates a range of artistic, cultural, sporting, community and special interest pursuits throughout the year.

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As the above definition and set of conditions for play implies, events are *sites of play* (with some exceptions, including competitive sports events, which are linked to extrinsic outcomes). An *event* is an experience that is demarcated by spatial, temporal and thematic parameters, "providing participants with social interaction beyond the everyday life" and positive engagement in the experience for its own sake (Hernández-Mogollón et al, 2014: 85). According to sociologist Johan Huizinga, events such as festivals, games and rituals are key sites of play in any culture. (1950) The relationship between events and play is clear, for the act of play and thus by implication here, the event:

*...adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual –
as a life function –
and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance,
its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a culture function.
The expression of it satisfies all kinds of communal ideals.*

Huizinga, 1950

Events, then, provide exceptional opportunities for play to occur in the public realm, and for citizens and visitors alike to engage collectively, and in multiple ways, in joyful experiences that transcend the ordinary, and that thus enhance liveability, marketability and sense of place.



SUITCASE RUMMAGE, NEW ACTON (IMAGE FROM DAVID CAFFERY)

WHAT CAN PLAY OFFER THE ACT?

Economic benefits of play

Studies by Tourism Research Australia identify play as a highly attractive characteristic in a tourist destination. A 2009 analysis of domestic consumer perceptions of Canberra as a short break holiday revealed the following key insights:

Short break holidays were considered to embody and meet consumers' main requirements for 'indulgence', 'expressing myself', 'fun and excitement' and 'freedom'.

Canberra, on the other hand, was seen as being a destination that met the needs for 'tradition', 'control' and 'wisdom and knowledge'.

The gap between the short break needs of Australians and those perceived of Canberra suggest that Canberra needs to be repositioned to better meet the core short break needs of Australians. (9-10)

A 2013 analysis of visitor perceptions of the ACT highlights similar concerns. Impressions of Canberra include:

National icons recognised as significant, but sometimes dull

Perception of limited activities

Lacking excitement for some

Strong perception that attractions are focused on education

(and not fun, hands-on)

A 'been there, done that' destination (4)

Rejuvenation of the destination image of Canberra as playful, both in terms of its large-scale events and national icons, and more generally as an everyday cultural experience, will improve this city's reputation as a dull immersive experience, and enhance its appeal as a short break holiday destination.

Cultural benefits of play

Play is key to the life of a city beyond its economic capability. Play is attributed with multiple individual and community cultural benefits. It is at its core generative, inclusive, social, active, creative and pleasurable for its own sake. (Henricks, 2006; Elkind, 2007; Brown, 2009) Play stimulates new ways of thinking about and of seeing the world (Dansky, 1999; Kane, 2004; Fink, 2010; Sicart, 2014; Henricks, 2015). Play is an experience of positive affect that contributes to individual and community health and wellbeing (Yarnal, 2006; Brown, 2009; Gray, 2011; Eberle, 2014). Play creates an alternate space from work and other forms of utilitarian engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006); Play incites openness to experience and challenges our unnecessarily risk-averse culture (RGray, 2011) Play encourages strangers, colleagues, friends and families to engage and collaborate with each other in non-confrontational ways beyond the parameters of ordinary life (Turner, 1982; Stevens, 2007; Bateson and Martin, 2013).



OUTDOOR PLAY, NGA SCULPTURE GARDEN

Play and the ACT

The importance of play in the ACT is increasingly acknowledged by the ACT local government and private sector alike – although the primary focus is on play in relation to children. The *Kids at Play* initiative from ACT Health is designed to address Canberra’s growing obesity problem and to encourage families to engage more with each other and with the broader community. The *Good Habits for Life* program encourages children and families to *Move More* and to *Get Into Life* through play:

When you make time to play together as a family, visit friends or make new ones, or just get out there and be part of the community, you and your family will get more out of life.

In July 2016 the ACT government launched the *Natureplay Canberra* initiative to encourage unstructured play in natural settings:

Nature Play CBR is about getting more children outdoors more often so they can reap the benefits of unstructured playing, learning and being physically active.

Children need nature play for their physical and mental health, for their cognitive and emotional development, and because they have a right to run, climb, build, get dirty, and imagine the world for themselves through play.

These two key ACT government initiatives aim to improve physical and mental health; reduce unhealthy levels of risk aversion; engender stronger family relations; and encourage creative engagement with the wider physical and social world.

Play is also a fundamental element of the pod playground and landscape design of the Arboretum; of the street-art-adorned pop up village in West Basin, of the café interiors and food design of Braddon and New Acton, and of the public art in Civic, Belconnen.

Events, Play and the ACT

Events bring life, colour and vitality to the Canberra region. They help build a strong sense of community pride, they provide a wealth of opportunities for community participation and they play a key role in formulating and shaping Canberra's identity.

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The ACT currently has a suite of playful events:

- large-scale events like *Enlighten*, *Floriade* and *Nightfest*, and the *National Multicultural Festival*;
- mid-scale events like *Art Not Apart* and *You are Here*
- small-scale and popup events like the weekend program at West Basin

We applaud this aspect of the events calendar, and note that play is a key component in the success of these events. We thus recommend that play and playfulness be embedded into the ACT Events Policy and into the annual events calendar – thus ensuring a city that is enlivened, engaged, connected and fun to inhabit and visit.

To reiterate, our recommendations include the following:

1. The majority of large-scale events in the ACT Calendar are 'playful', or contain components of play to encourage active, joyful and non-ordinary engagement from visitors;
2. Smaller play events are held in key precincts throughout the year to develop Canberra's identity as a playful city;
3. A proportion of the play events are targeted at inclusive and intergenerational engagement and participation, with access and equity as core to both event design and execution;
4. The terms 'play' and 'playful' are deployed in the policy and marketing literature to build and reinforce the image of Canberra as a playful city;
5. The *Play, Creativity and Culture* Project, an applied research group in the University of Canberra's Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, collaborate with the ACT government and other key stakeholders to assist in the implementation of the above, and to undertake research on play across the lifespan in Canberra.

The *Play, Creativity and Culture* Project would welcome the opportunity to further develop the above recommendations in consultation with the ACT government and key stakeholders.

WHO ARE WE: THE PLAY, CREATIVITY AND CULTURE PROJECT

The *Play, Creativity and Culture* Project is an applied research project that critically examines the role and capability of play in adult cultural practice. It investigates sites of play sites to identify and explore those elements of play that elicit forms of creative and collaborative engagement, and examines the impact of these elements on players and their environments.

The Play, Creativity and Culture Project explores play as a mode of engagement, as a driver of creativity and innovation, and as a facilitator of individual and community wellbeing.

Situated as we are in the ACT, the *Play, Creativity and Culture* Project aims to examine Canberra as a site of play, and to work with local institutions and institutions to make Canberra a 'playful' city – one that incites play in myriad, diverse and beneficial ways.

The aims of the *Play, Creativity and Culture* Project are:

- To contribute to the development and proliferation of playful environments across the lifespan;
- To investigate sites of play in cultural practice as sites of community engagement and cultural heritage;
- To identify and explore the conditions of play that elicit creative and collaborative engagement;
- To examine the impact of play on players and their environments;
- To explore the relationship between play and well-being, and to apply this knowledge in real-world contexts for community benefit
- To disseminate knowledge of the role and benefits of play in cultural life, and to apply knowledge in real-world contexts for community benefits;
- To promote forms of play as ethical approaches to world-making.

CONTACT

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to the following people for their contributions to this submission:

David Caffery, Dionysus Cultural Developments

Gregor Mews, Urban Synergies

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